

GREATER PRAIRIE CHICKEN

Greater prairie chickens were placed on Colorado's endangered species list in 1973 because only about 600 were estimated to remain in the sandhills of Yuma County. Apparently, development of center pivot irrigation systems in the 1970s provided a new food source for the species as it has expanded both in number and distribution. Application of Prescribed Grazing by many ranchers may have played a role in the increase. Populations have been relatively stable at several thousand for most of the past two decades. The Colorado Division of Wildlife trapped and transplanted greater prairie chickens into three new locations in northeastern Logan, northwestern Washington, and east central Weld (northeast of Greeley) Counties in the mid 1980s. Populations have remained low and localized in Washington and Weld Counties, but have been slowly increasing and expanding in eastern Logan County since the releases. Greater prairie chickens were downlisted from endangered to threatened status in Colorado in the early 1990s and have since been delisted.

The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) in northeastern Colorado converted considerable, primarily marginal farmland within and along the peripheries of the sandhills to stands of tall and mid warm and cool season grasses. No major increases in greater prairie chicken populations have been noted in primary chicken ranges and it is uncertain whether CRP has actually helped the species there. The species has pioneered into some peripheral areas and is occupying CRP at least part of the time. Greater prairie chickens have been expanding into mixed sandsage range and CRP fields northeast of Fleming in Logan County where excellent grass cover has potentially helped them. Isolated males have pioneered far from sandhill ranges and have been heard displaying in spring in smooth brome grass dominated CRP fields in southwestern Phillips, southeastern Logan, and north central Washington Counties. The quality of the CRP in these locations is suitable for leks, but is probably not suited for range expansion of greater prairie chickens.

The following guidelines may be used when writing specifications for wildlife practices for greater prairie chickens in Colorado. These are guidelines only. They may need to be adapted to individual situations and site requirements.

ESTABLISHING PERENNIAL COVER IN CENTER PIVOT CORNERS

Follow NRCS Practice Standard 645, Wildlife Upland Habitat Management, and 550, Range Seeding. The objective of establishing pivot corners for greater prairie chickens is to provide secure, year around survival and nesting cover.

Guidelines:

- Apply this practice guideline to non-irrigated center pivot corners adjacent to irrigated croplands within and adjacent to sandhill rangelands that are occupied or that have high potential to be occupied by greater prairie chickens,
- Use perennial, tall, warm-season grass mixtures suited to the ecological site. Switchgrass, sand bluestem, prairie sandreed, and yellow Indiangrass are the preferred species. See the Ecological Site Description and Plant Materials Technical Note #59 for further suited species and seed mixture percentages of each grass.
- Grass may be planted into sorghum, corn, or millet stubble but cannot be planted into wheat stubble.
- Herbicides may be desirable for weed control. Consult a licensed pesticide professional for herbicide recommendations specific to the site.
- Mowing, haying, or grazing are not permitted during grass establishment. Following deferment for establishment, periodic grazing, mowing, or haying may be allowed as needed to keep the vegetative stand healthy. If the circle will be grazed the corners must be fenced out. Noxious weed control is the landowner's responsibility.